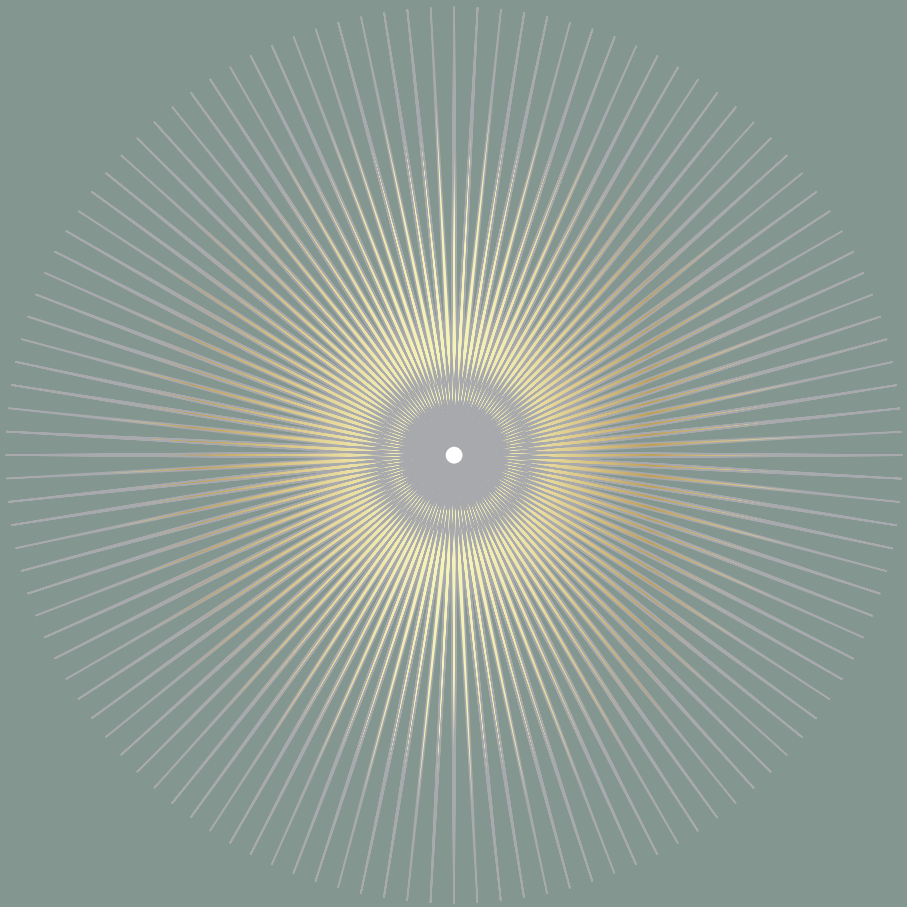


# Kamma in Buddhism



Buddhadasa Bhikkhu



A 'Message from Suan Mokkh'

# Kamma in Buddhism

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*by Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu*

# Messages from Suan Mokkh Series - No. 4

## Kamma in Buddhism

by Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu

Translated from the Thai by Santikaro

กรรมในพระพุทธศาสนา

This article was prepared in 1988 by Ajahn Buddhadāsa as part of a series of pamphlets to be distributed at a major exhibition on his life and work organized by Ajahn Runjuan Indarakamhaeng and other students at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok.

Another English translation was published in 1990. This translation first appeared online in 1996 and then in slightly revised pamphlets.

This new electronic edition has been revised by Santikaro in collaboration with a network of volunteers.

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## Anumodanā

To all Dhamma Comrades, those helping to spread Dhamma:

Break out the funds to spread Dhamma to let Faithful Trust flow,  
Broadcast majestic Dhamma to radiate long-living joy.

Release unexcelled Dhamma to tap the spring of Virtue,  
Let safely peaceful delight flow like a cool mountain stream.

Dhamma leaves of many years sprouting anew, reaching out,  
To unfold and bloom in the Dhamma Centers of all towns.

To spread lustrous Dhamma and in hearts glorified plant it,  
Before long, weeds of sorrow, pain, and affliction will flee.

As Virtue revives and resounds throughout Thai society,  
All hearts feel certain love toward those born, aging, and dying.

Congratulations and Blessings to all Dhamma Comrades,  
You who share Dhamma to widen the people's prosperous joy.

Heartiest appreciation from Buddhadāsa Indapañño,  
Buddhist Science ever shines beams of Bodhi long-lasting.

In grateful service, fruits of merit and wholesome successes,  
Are all devoted in honor to Lord Father Buddha.

Thus may the Thai people be renowned for their Virtue,  
May perfect success through Buddhist Science awaken their hearts.

May the King and His Family live long in triumphant strength,  
May joy long endure throughout this our word upon earth.

from

*Buddha dāsa Indapañño*

Mokkhabalārāma

Chaiya, 2 November 2530



# *Kamma* in Buddhism

*An article written on 7 April 2531 (1988)  
at Suan Mokkhabalārāma, Chaiya*

**As Buddhists, we must understand *kamma* (action and the result of action) as it is explained in Buddhism.** We should not follow blindly the *kamma* teachings of other religions; if we do, we will spin around pitifully according to *kamma* without being able to get beyond its power or realize its end.<sup>1</sup>

**Why do we need to know the essence of *kamma*?** Because our lives are inseparable from it and happen according to it. To be more precise, we can say that life is actually a stream of *kamma*. Wanting to do something (*kamma*, action) causes one to perform actions and receive the results of those actions; then, desires to do other actions arise again and again incessantly. Therefore, life is merely patterns of *kamma*. If we rightly understand *kamma*, we can live our lives at peace, without any problems or suffering.

**There are two primary *kamma* doctrines.** One has been taught since before the Buddha's time and is still taught outside Buddhism; the other is the Buddhist principle of *kamma*. The first doctrine presents only half of the story. In that doctrine, one cannot conquer *kamma* and remains always under its domination. One actually desires to be under its power and asks for its help,

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<sup>1</sup> *Kamma* (Pāli) and *karma* (Sanskrit) are equivalent in meaning and usage. The Tipiṭaka of Theravāda Buddhism uses the Pāli language.

without ever trying to fight for one's own liberation. One thus performs kamma as if accumulating assets for more satisfactory rebirth. One never thinks of ending kamma. One expects to rely on it instead of trying to end it. In Buddhism, we can understand kamma more fully so that we can conquer it and be liberated from it, that is, not carry the burden of kamma anymore. We neither sit waiting for things to happen, nor leave our fate in the hands of gods, nor follow superstitions like purifying our kamma in sacred rivers.

**To be beyond kamma** seems incredible to most people; they may consider it a deception or a huckster's trick. Nonetheless, it really is possible if we take the Buddha as our True and Noble Friend. This will help us in practicing the complete set of ten aspects of rightness (*sammatta*)<sup>2</sup>: the noble eightfold path plus right insight knowledge and right liberation in accordance with the law of specific conditionality (*idappaccayatā*). In such practice, there is no foolish feeling that leads to desire for the various results of *kamma* (actions). A doctrine master from Southern India and contemporary of the Buddha heard that the Buddha taught the cessation of kamma. He then sent his disciples to ask the Buddha questions and to ask for his instructions. This well-known story is told in the *Soḷasapañhā* (Sixteen Questions), the last chapter of the Sutta-Nipāta. Traditionally, many people have memorized the Buddha's answers to these questions and take them for guidance in their study and practice.

**Nowadays, wrong teachings concerning kamma** are publicized in books and articles by various Indian and Western writers with titles such as "Kamma and Rebirth." Although they are presented in the name of Buddhism, these teachings are actually about kamma and rebirth as understood in Hinduism. So the right teaching of Buddhism is misrepresented. This should be

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<sup>2</sup> Sutta on the Great Forty (MN 117).



recognized and corrected so that the Buddhist kamma principle can be preserved in its undistorted essence. The Buddha accepted as correct – that is, as not a wrong understanding of kamma – the half-formed teaching concerning good and evil deeds and their results that was presented before his time and outside his teaching. However, he added to it a final aspect, namely, the end of kamma, which is the essential Buddhist principle that completes the teaching on kamma. This cessation of kamma goes by two names. It can be called ‘the third kind of kamma’ because there are good deeds, evil deeds, and the kamma leading to the end of both good and evil deeds. Sometimes four kinds of kamma are distinguished: good deeds, evil deeds, mixed deeds, and the kamma that is the end of all kamma. When enumerated in this fourfold way, the additional kamma taught in Buddhism becomes the fourth kind of kamma. However, if we consider mixed kamma as made up of good actions and evil actions, there are basically three kinds of kamma, again with the kamma that ends all kamma as the third kind. This three-fold formulation is easy, convenient, and concise. If this third kind of kamma is left out, the teaching misses the essence of kamma in the true Buddhist sense.

**Kamma and Rebirth:** Rebirth occurs every time one does a deed, and that rebirth occurs spontaneously at the moment of action. We need not wait for rebirth to happen after death, according to the usual worldly understanding. When one thinks and acts, the mind changes spontaneously through the power of desire and clinging, which immediately lead to becoming and birth in accordance with the law of dependent co-origination (*paṭicca-samuppāda*). There is no need to wait for physical death in order for rebirth to occur. This truth should be realized as the true teaching of Buddhism, as a core principle of the original, pristine Buddhism that states there is no self (*attā*) to be reborn. How the concept of rebirth after death crept into Buddhism is

difficult to explain, and we need not concern ourselves with it here. Simply preventing rebirth within the stream of dependent co-origination is enough for us to be free. Stopping egoistic rebirth is truly in accordance with Buddhism, and such action will be the kind of kamma that can be taken as refuge. When a good deed is done, goodness spontaneously arises; when an evil deed is done, evilness spontaneously arises. There is no need to wait for any further results. If there will be any birth after death, that rebirth only occurs through the kamma one has done in this very life and the results of which have already occurred here. We need not worry about rebirth such that it obstructs our practice.

**Receiving the Fruits of Kamma:** We should see the truth that the mind that performs a deed is kamma itself and the subsequent mind is the result (*vipāka*) of that kamma. Other results that follow it are only uncertain by-products, since they may or may not occur, or do not keep up with our expectations due to other interfering factors. That the results of actions occur to the minds performing them is most certainly in line with the Buddhist principle that there is no self or soul to be reborn, as stated by the Buddha on numerous occasions. To hold the view that a soul or somebody is reborn deviates from the truth of not-self (*anattā*). Whenever a good or evil deed is done, goodness or evilness spontaneously arises accordingly without having to wait for later results. Nonetheless, most people expect certain results according to their wishes; then, they are disappointed when other factors interfere. Such intervening circumstances may lead one to hold a wrong view that good actions brings bad results and bad actions brings good results. We should be careful of this wrong view and should develop right understanding concerning the fruits of kamma.

Our understanding of how the results of kamma are received or experienced must always be self-apparent, immediate, and

inviting of inquiry, and should never contradict the truth that the five aggregates of human life are not-self. Mind is merely a phenomenon pushed this way and that by conditions, stimulated to do things by environmental factors. The resulting reactions are unescapable and are regarded as good or evil according to one's feelings of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Either kind pushes us into suffering, thus we should aim at ending kamma and getting beyond it. Then we will have realized true insight, awakened, and fully blossomed, which is genuine Buddhahood.

**There is a moralistic teaching of kamma** that retains an illusion of self that owns this and that. This version contradicts the principle of not-self stressed by the Buddha. We should correctly understand this perspective; otherwise, we will not benefit from practicing kamma teachings, since we will not be able to go beyond kamma. Endlessly remaining under the power of kamma is not the kamma teaching of Buddhism. Instead, wholeheartedly practice the kamma that ends all kamma. This will prevent us from unwittingly going astray.

**Activity and Response:** The actions or movements of sentient beings that are done with volition, particularly with craving, and that arise through defilements, are called 'kamma.' An activity that is not caused by defilement, for example, one with an *arahant's* intention, intention free of greed, hatred, and delusion, is not called 'kamma'; it is called '*kiriya*' (activity). The result of *kiriya* is called '*paṭikiriya*' (reaction), the natural consequence of the activity, while the result of kamma is called '*vipāka*' (fruit of action). These results occur justly in accordance with the law of nature. Ordinary people have ordinary volitions (*cetanā*) as the causes of their actions, which are consequently kamma. Good volition leads to good action; evil volition leads to evil action. Through moral and cultural training, everybody is taught to do good deeds that do not cause trouble to others and

bring good results to everyone. Therefore, kamma concerns the law of nature and can be investigated scientifically.

**Types of Kamma:** There are many types of kamma depending on the characteristics of the deeds and their doers. Some act with selfishness concerning the selves they desire to be. Some perform actions that lead to the ending of the self-illusion and the realization of Nibbāna. Some people are pleased with worldly prosperity, others with heavenly prosperity, and some with the realization of Nibbāna, aims that seem to be in perpetual contradiction. Some like to show off their good deeds, while others perform their good deeds secretly. Some proclaim their meritorious deeds with fanfare, while others do not need such fanfare. Some do their deeds with excessive ritual, while others do theirs without any ceremony at all. Some do theirs out of magical or superstitious fear, while others do theirs properly as Buddhist practice. Obviously, there are many types of kamma. Nevertheless, they all can be classified into two categories: those with self and for the sake of self, and those that aim for the ending of self-clinging and selfishness. Some do deeds in a business-like manner, expecting excessive profits. Others wish for the end of the vicious circle of life and death. Look for yourselves! Ordinary people do good deeds merely for the sake of inordinate profits.

**Kamma and Not-Self:** The question of kamma and not-self is confusing and difficult to understand for various reasons. A monk once asked the Buddha, “How does kamma done by not-self give results for self?” This question arose because of the teaching on not-self that points out how the ‘actor’ is merely a mind-body process void of self. After an action (*kamma*) is done by a selfless mind-body, how could it have any results for a ‘self’ who is the ‘doer’ who intentionally acted? The new concept of not-self contradicts the old concept of self. There is a self-consciousness that claims to be not-self and does things in the name of not-

self, but the sense of self still exists to receive the results of the deeds. Hence, this monk's question. If we see it rightly, we will understand that when the mind-body is not-self, the results of its actions will happen to a selfless mind-body, also. However, if that mind-body is full of a sense of self, the results of its actions will always happen to this apparent self. If kamma is not-self, its result will be not-self, and what occurs in accordance with kamma will be not-self. The things, whether human or animal, that we conventionally speak of as 'actors' or 'doers of kamma' will also be not-self. The facts of kamma and not-self are never separate and never oppose each other.

**The ending of kamma is the same thing as Nibbāna**, in other words, is synonymous with Nibbāna. From where, then, do the teachers come who teach people that death is the end of kamma? When someone dies, people murmur, 'Oh well, his kamma is finished.' Moreover, they often say that one dies according to one's merits and kamma, without realizing that what is happening to them as they speak is also according to their good and bad kamma, and this will continue until they really reach the end of kamma, namely, Nibbāna.

**Nibbāna is freedom from kamma and its results.** Further, Nibbāna is freedom from the vicious cyclic existence (*samsāra*) that keeps spinning according to kamma. Nibbāna, therefore, is lovely and loveable, not frightening in the least. Even so, people prefer being trapped within the vicious cycles of birth and death according to their kamma, particularly the kamma they desire as a result of their defilements, although they never really get what they wish. People with big egos usually fear and hate the end of kamma because egoism seeks kamma-results that seem pleasing to it.

**Kamma is burden (*upadhi*).** When one performs kamma, life happens according to kamma, that is, one is bound by kamma

no matter whether it is good or evil kamma. Good kamma makes one laugh and bad kamma makes one cry, but both weary us almost to death. Even so, people still like to laugh, since they mistakenly believe that good kamma is great virtue. When kamma does not bind our lives, it is as if there are no chains on our legs, whether iron chains or diamond-studded golden chains. Life becomes a burden when it is weighed down by kamma and we have to carry and support it. The end of kamma makes our lives light and free, but only a few people appreciate this as it is obscured by the veils of *attā* (self).

**In conclusion**, as Buddhists let's try to do only the kamma that is the end of kamma. When we see that kamma has occupied and ruled our lives, we will strive to practice, improve ourselves, and fight in every possible way to triumph over both good and evil kamma, so that none of them will oppress our minds. Let's develop minds that are clean, clear, and calm because they are no longer disturbed by kamma and its results. Nowadays, most people understand kamma as something bad and undesirable. This is correct because both good and evil kamma are despicable in that they cause the vicious cycles of birth and death to go on without cessation.

**Kamma in Buddhism** is that *kamma*, action, which leads to the end of all kamma so that life is above and beyond kamma. Far from despicable, it is something to be understood and fully integrated into our lives. 'Living beyond kamma' is something to be realized and attained.





สังขสาร

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พลิก

เอกสารจดหมายเหตุพุทธทาส อินทปัญโญ. สังขสาร เรื่องกรรม. (2531). BIA4.3.1/20 กล่อง 6 หน้า 137.

“Kamma.” Notes typed by Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu.  
Ref. Archives document of the Buddhadāsa Indapañño Archives  
BIA 3.1/20 (1/2) Box 6. page 137.





## About the Author

Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu was born in 1906, the son of a southern Thai mother and an ethnic Chinese father. He followed Thai custom by entering a local monastery in 1926, studied for a couple years in Bangkok, and then founded his own refuge for study and practice in 1932. Since then, he has had a profound influence on not only Thai Buddhism but other religions in Siam and Buddhism in the West. Among his more important accomplishments, he:

- Challenged the hegemony of later commentarial texts with the primacy of the Buddha's original discourses.
- Integrated serious Dhamma study, intellectual creativity, and rigorous practice.
- Explained Buddha-Dhamma with an emphasis on this life, including the possibility of experiencing Nibbāna ourselves.
- Softened the dichotomy between householder and monastic practice, stressing that the noble eightfold path is available to everyone.
- Offered doctrinal support for addressing social and environmental issues, helping to foster socially engaged Buddhism in Siam.
- Shaped his forest monastery as an innovative teaching environment and Garden of Liberation.

After a series of illnesses, including strokes, he died in 1993. He was cremated without the usual pomp and expense.

## About the Translator

Santikaro went to Thailand with the Peace Corps in 1980, was ordained as a Theravada monk in 1985, trained at Suan Mokkh under Ajahn Buddhādāsa, and became his primary English translator. Santikaro led meditation retreats at Suan Mokkh for many years, and was unofficial abbot of nearby Dawn Kiam. He is a founding member of Think Sangha, a community of socially engaged Buddhist thinker activists that has given special attention to the ethical and spiritual impact of consumerism and other modern developments.

Santikaro returned to the USA's Midwest in 2001 and retired from formal monastic life in 2004. He continues to teach in the Buddhist tradition with an emphasis on the early Pāli sources and the insights of Ajahn Buddhādāsa. He is the founder of Liberation Park, a modern American expression of Buddhist practice, study, and social responsibility in rural Wisconsin. There he continues to study, practice, translate the work of his teacher, teach, and imagine the future of Buddha-Dhamma in the West.

## **‘Messages from Suan Mokkh’**

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- *4. Kamma in Buddhism*
- *5. Let’s All Be Buddhadāsas \**
- *6. Help! Kālāma Sutta, Help! \**

## **Recommended Reading (Books)**

- *Mindfulness With Breathing: A Manual for Serious Beginners*
- *Handbook for Mankind*
- *The First Ten Years of Suan Mokkh*
- *Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree*
- *Keys to Natural Truth*
- *The Prison of Life*
- *Paticcasamuppāda: Practical Dependent Origination*
- *Under the Bodhi Tree: Buddha’s Original Vision of Dependent Co-Arising \**

\* forthcoming

## **Online Resources**

[www.suanmokkh.org](http://www.suanmokkh.org)

[www.liberationpark.org](http://www.liberationpark.org)

[www.bia.or.th](http://www.bia.or.th)

## **Buddhadāsa Indapañño Archives**

Established in 2010, the Buddhadāsa Indapañño Archives collect, maintain, and present the original works of Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu. Also known as Suan Mokkh Bangkok, it is an innovative place for fostering mutual understanding between traditions, studying and practicing Dhamma.



## **Liberation Park**

Liberation Park is a Dhamma refuge in the USA's Midwest inspired by Suan Mokkh. Here, Santikaro and friends work to nurture a garden of liberation along the lines taught by Ajahn Buddhadāsa, where followers of the Buddha-Dhamma Way can explore Dhamma as Nature and in the Pāli suttas.



*“To be beyond kamma seems incredible to most people; they may consider it a deception or a huckster’s trick. Nonetheless, it really is possible if we take the Buddha as our True and Noble Friend.”*

*Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu*

